

Spaces, Places & Lines Between Teacher Education and Community Garden: A Diffractive Entanglement with Posthumanism and Feminist New Materialist Thinking

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Abstract

This paper examines the diffractive connectedness of spaces and places among education, nature, academia, and community. In it, I follow a project in which trainee teachers and a community garden volunteer group engage photography and poetry to connect with each other in cross community-education spaces. As I think through the shared visual and material mementos, I document a discomfort that emerges as I remember these encounters and reflect on their entanglement with philosophical posthuman and feminist new materialist ideas. The paper will support other education researchers to traverse the use of these philosophical ideas in praxis.

Keywords: Initial teacher education, posthumanism, feminist new materialisms, slow pedagogy, spaces, places

Introduction

In this paper, I examine how posthumanist and feminist new materialist ideas *intra-act*¹ with a community garden project that sought to push the boundaries of a teacher education program (Barad, 2007). As a teacher educator in this program, I share both personal vignettes and insights into student teachers' processes of sense-making as they engage with the community garden project. I also share moments of discomfort that I felt throughout the process.

The idea for the project began simply. I conceived of it as a way to connect trainee teachers in a university centre space with local community spaces. I wanted trainees to experience more than what the classroom could offer, helping them see how connecting with other humans and non-humans could help them in their trainee teacher development. The community garden experience, however, was fraught with tensions which I did not anticipate.

I encouraged a collaboration between the community garden volunteers and trainee teachers by first asking them to grow plants together, share stories and take photographs of the experiences, then later, to have an ekphrastic poetry session to summarise the shared experiences together. Ekphrastic poetry differs from other forms of poetry in that it vividly describes a visual work of art, in this case, the captured, shared experience in the photographs. From a teacher educator's perspective, I hoped that these shared components of the project would not only build

¹ The concept of intra-action has been developed by Barad (2007) when considering entangled multiple agencies. In contrast to interaction which only acknowledges separate bodies or entities, intra-action does not assume the ownership of individual agency but instead is an entanglement of forces or things in constant flux.

trainee teachers' capacity for connecting with others, but also help them develop their teacher identities as responsible teacher citizens in this community.

For my analysis of the outcomes and artifacts of this project, I used the works of Deleuze and Guattari (1988), Barad (2007), Ulmer (2017), and Ingold (2016). Together, they allowed me to produce a diffractive analysis that included the entanglement of these two entities: wildflowers and lines.

Context

I teach trainee teachers preparing to work in vocational colleges across the UK, teaching students 16 years old and older. The university centre offers this program as a "Further Education" college, thus situating it physically and figuratively on the periphery of education. The university centre was built in 2014 in a town inhabited by working-class families. It was meant to enable opportunity and "social mobility" through education and was funded by a government educational policy program called 'Widening Participation'. This initiative aimed to increase the number of students accessing higher education within further education colleges. The program targeted those from lower socio-economic and under-represented groups in response to recommendations from the 1997 Dearing Report. The widening participation policies that ensued, aimed to increase participation in higher education by 50% by 2010 and to increase the number of under-represented groups in teacher training and higher education generally (Thompson, 2019). The policies and the wording used in the widening participation narrative are rife with meritocratic ideals that arguably reaffirm social class by reifying the idea of the "disadvantaged" and thus maintains inequalities in higher education and beyond, according to Cunningham and Samson (2021).

The vocational sector for students aged 16 and older has been largely underfunded for decades in the UK (Orr, 2020). The training of teachers for this sector has been under political scrutiny for almost as long, with white paper after white paper offering up answers to the problems of Further Education teacher training. While there have been recent investments in Further Education, the funding has fallen in real terms by 14% between 2010-2019 (Farquharson et al., 2021). The trainees in this project have been in the margins themselves as students that have come to education later in life, perhaps through a non-standard academic route to higher education and are now becoming teachers themselves to pass on their skills to support others. This is the context that has caused some to challenge the professionalism of teachers working in this sector. It may also suggest a reason why teachers in this sector struggle to form their teacher identities in this space.

Ainley (2000), speaking at the Economic and Social Research Council (ESRC) Teaching and Learning Conference, argued that further empirical study should be undertaken to identify how trainee teachers form their identities. Further, he suggested that academics study "why some [trainees] are more able than others to turn their cultural labour into realizable forms of cultural capital" (n.p.). He went on to say that scholars need to understand "how this relates to 'social capital' formation and peer networks...[so it can] become the heart of the new education research agenda" (n.p.). This mini project, in some ways, supports that idea. It expands the social and cultural experiences of trainee teachers while they navigate the challenges of a strict teacher training agenda.

It is in this context, which is always already relational, that I entangle an *agential realism* of the space with the trainee teacher experience. Agential realism is, according to Barad's (2007) theory, "the ontological inseparability of intra-acting agencies" that emerge as a result of entities/agencies being brought together (p. 333). Seen this way, it would not be possible to exclude and separate the context described above from the trainee teacher experience, even if the trainees are not conscious of it or even if I am. The personal vignette that follows also forms part of the context that I bring to trainee teacher experiences.

Personal Vignette

To me, this place, the town, feels lost. It feels like I am in an urban swamp. It is a run-down area in the north-western part of the UK. The students and garden volunteers go about their business on littered streets with forgotten shops. For me, the community garden is an escape from this and a beautiful space of tranquillity. The park and university centre together bring hope, new connections, and growth. I am interested in the connections between these two disparate, yet equally fruitful places.

Each day, I pass the community garden and allotments on my way to teach trainee teachers. (In the UK, allotments are community spaces that can be rented to grow fruit and vegetables for those that don't have the green space at home.) As a teacher educator, I have felt a growing responsibility to support students at the university centre and beyond, to make them aware of sustainable community efforts focused on and inspired by United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDG, 2015). So, I set-up a meeting with the community garden volunteers to make connections with the teacher education programme, in the hope of acquainting the trainee teachers with the green space on their doorstep.

Theoretical and Methodological Underpinnings

A posthuman shift in our teacher education curriculum has led me to a study of humans and non-human intra-actions in education spaces, with a focus on the work of Barad (2007), Braidotti (2006), and Haraway (2016), as well as other academics. As I look at the multiplicity that encompasses the park and university centre, the wildlife and humans, the trainee teachers, and the community, I realize that posthuman scholars have helped me understand this entanglement of perceived differences in new ways. I have recognised that these different entities have been 'othered' in some way at some time in their histories. The idea of otherness, while not particularly embedded in posthumanist narratives, is connected to it by way of humanist concepts of species superiority rooted in an anthropocentric world view (Braidotti, 2006).

As I pondered the fine line between difference and otherness, I tried to relate these concepts to the experiences of the trainee teachers and the community garden volunteers. Both groups operate in such proximity to one another, yet both have very different agendas and ontological life-views. My project would entangle them. I did not imagine there would be risks with such an entanglement. I imagined that it would be interesting to have academia operating both inside its usual space and outside with nature; hence it was agreed that trainees and volunteers would share the community garden space, including the human and non-human entities, tools, stories, vegetables, dirt, and skills. I hoped that there would be knowledge

exchange as they engaged in planting, recycling, and composting that would enhance social connectedness and mutual growth. In Deleuze and Guattarian (1988) terms, I was piloting an alternative line of flight for the teacher training course which I hoped would benefit all involved.

I also considered Deleuze and Guattari's (1988) philosophical thinking around the rhizome as an alternate metaphor to the arboreal tree. Its relevance to my project struck me. A rhizome, as conceived by Deleuze and Guattari, can be understood as having no beginning or end; as always being in some middle ground. It has lines of flight, is non-hierarchical, is non-linear, and has no clear lines of descent. As a metaphorical influence, the rhizome allows for new ways of thinking that are not predictable. For example, the rhizome connects and reproduces through an additive process, or as Adkins (2015) understands it, a process of and, and, and, rather than seed pollination.

Combining Deleuze and Guattari's (1988) idea of rhizomes with Ulmer's (2018) concept of wildflowers as marginalised fauna when perceived as weeds, was provocative for me given the project – my desire for clarity around difference and otherness – and a need for methodological structure. Ulmer (2018) helped me to understand one aspect of the distinction I was seeking while also providing me with a way of thinking about methodology. She applies the term “ecosystem” to both, saying:

Like plants, methodologies live within different ecosystems. And these ecosystems support communities, which, in turn, consist of many different populations of organisms living together. The underlying ecological principle is simple, yet important: when everything is interconnected, everything matters. More to the point: community matters. Actions do not occur in isolation, but have the potential to affect everyone, everywhere. (p. 783)

Related to this is Ulmer's (2017) idea of *slow ontology*. Slow ontology is an educational research practice that attunes to the rhythm of that being researched and those researching, neither forcing a fast or slow pace but living, writing, and breathing the research through “locality, materiality and artisan craft” (p. 201).

Taking up these various concepts to understand my project, I find that I have also entangled them with the scholastic requirements set out by the university and powers above them. However, while I require trainee teachers to produce evidence of meeting these requirements, I also rebel, like Freire (1970) against this normative academic banking approach and choose to do teacher training differently by adopting alternative frameworks and methodologies.

The Project

The trainee teachers, the community garden volunteers, and I, agreed that we not only wanted to grow together but also, to create together. The trainee teachers visited the community garden weekly to work alongside the existing community garden volunteer group. They learned how to grow vegetables, fruit, and flowers. In return, we shared some teaching experiences with them. After a few weeks of working in the garden together and interacting, creating, and taking photographs in that space, I suggested having a workshop on ekphrastic poetry. I believed it was an accessible activity that all volunteers could take part in. This idea was inspired by the work of Lemieux (2021) as part of the *PhEmaterialist* movement.

Ekphrastic poetry is created in response to a work of art, or photography. This can then take the art to a new plain and create a synergy between the original artwork and the newly created poem. The technique has been chosen within the project because of the freedom associated with it; it provides a chance for uninhibited writing and an opportunity for a collaborative approach. The ekphrastic poem is not intended to describe the artwork but instead it is an interpretation of meaning or sharing of visual associations created from engaging with it.

In the project described in this paper, the visual provocations for the ekphrastic poem were the photographic images taken in the community garden by Gavin Trafford, a trainee teacher on the university course, specialising in photography.



Figure 1

Photograph of the community garden entrance, volunteers and trainee teachers discussing composting.
(Credit: G. Trafford, 2021)

The Ekphrastic Poetry Experience

The photographs captured the otherness of the space. I could sense that the material, non-human elements, and the human disruptions were central to the images. We used the community classroom situated in the park. We put up large, printed images of the photographs taken over the past weeks. The trainee teachers planned the workshop and took ownership of the classroom space to share their teaching skills with the volunteers who had shared their gardening skills with them. The trainee teachers were nervous, some engaged more fully than others, and not all appreciated the value of the experience, as I had perceived it.

In the workshop, trainees asked volunteers to spend the afternoon looking at the photographs, explained the idea of ekphrastic poetry, and encouraged them to share their responses. While I was also in attendance, my thoughts wandered to personal moments.



Figure 2

Fauna and flora, community garden volunteers and trainee teachers tasting the wild raspberries in October.
(Credit: G. Trafford, 2021)

The Space and Place as an Agent Becoming

Creswell (2004) studied a similar sense of space and place in his work on human geography, and specifically, with his work in the community gardens of New York. He found that these spaces acted as places or sites of recognition, culture, history, and identity (Creswell, 2011). It is interesting to note that while the concept of a community garden is a place where everyone is welcome, the trainee teachers felt like visitors despite living locally to the park. There was a moment when I felt that we might never belong here; that we are merely passing through. As visitors to this place, the trainees knew they were not as invested in the park's becoming as the volunteers were. The volunteers knew this too.

Personal Vignette

I could sense that we were still visitors in this garden space and that the volunteers felt that this was an odd space with the trainees. The trainee teachers were equally cautious. They didn't seem to quite buy-in. Perhaps they didn't believe in the value of this exercise or in my methodology/approach to it. Perhaps they were just going along with the project because I had asked them to. These unspoken tensions were starting to make me feel uncomfortable and wondered if I had pushed the idea too far.

I came to realise that the volunteers were not invested in trainees' experiences of becoming teachers, and that the trainee teachers were not invested in the volunteers becoming community gardeners. This said, the garden transformations, the trainees' transformations as teachers and my own becoming as a teacher educator changed the community in subtle ways because of our collective intra-actions. As a site of entanglement, the garden as an intra-active space itself became a place for slow ontology and pedagogy. I developed a new appreciation for this space that invited us to pause and forget our constructivist agendas and invited us to join the rhythm and beat of the project itself if only as visitors (Payne & Wattchow, 2009). Ulmer (2018) notes that community gardens are not moves towards assimilation but "spontaneous cultivators of difference" (p. 785). Perhaps it was this that I recognised and wanted to be part of, in my practice as teacher and researcher.

The trainee teachers, I supposed, did not feel as connected to the garden or even the park or the town as I did because they considered them to be *non-places* as Augé (1995) defines it. He says that a "space that cannot be defined as relational, or historical, or concerned with identity [is] a non-place" (pp. 77-78).

Personal Vignette

I had envisaged the project as a nomadic activity, shooting from our rhizomatic gatherings, however, the transition from the university centre to the garden space was contradictory. The desire to create a connection between trainee teachers and the community was feeling forced. Some were opting out of the engagement. I hadn't anticipated a resistance from the trainees to get involved. I questioned why. Was I deluded in thinking that teachers/students would want to know the community on their doorstep? Was wanting them to appreciate the land, the trees, the space such a wild idea?

The town, built on dock trade, once flourished. Now it was a concrete jungle of council and college buildings, a transient place for commuters to study and work, and a juxtaposition of the old and the new. I was drawn to the aerial view of the park that highlighted the pathway walked between the garden and university centre that both shared this space (See Figure 3).

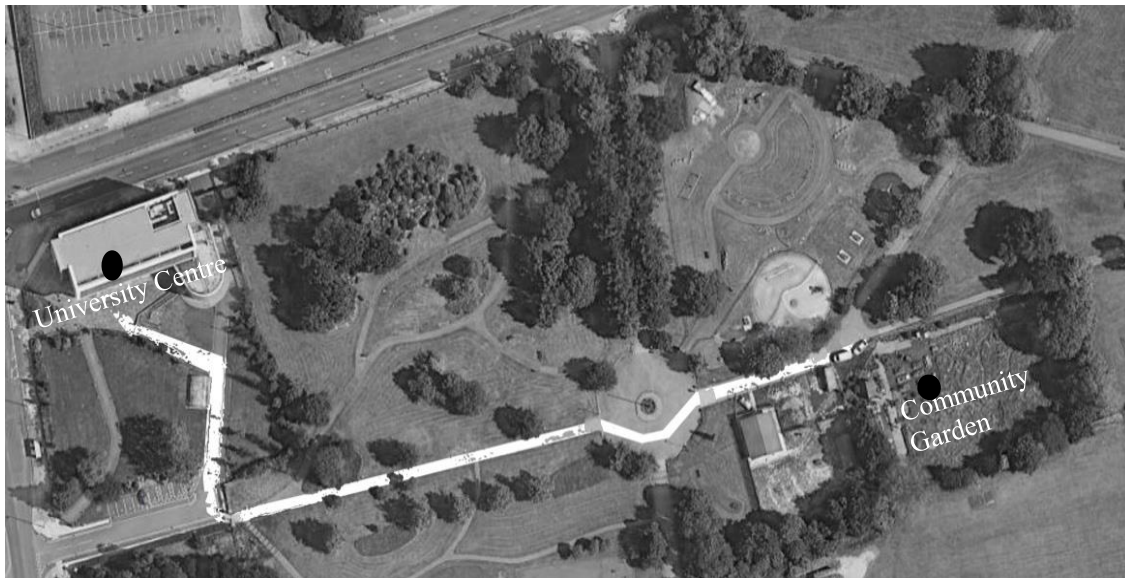


Figure 3

Aerial view of the pathway between the University Centre and the Community Garden.

The trodden path in this photograph seemed to connect, histories, cultures, humans, and non-humans. It brought to my mind Tim Ingold's (2016) study of lines as lives lived authentically between places. I found myself asking the same question as he did: "How could there be places... if people did not come and go?" (p. 104).

While these spaces, particularly the university centre, have meaning for me and the trainees as a site of study and intra-action and we take this pathway to make those educational connections, we sometimes veer off the beaten track, perhaps to pick a flower, or shorten the time to our destination, or just to wander away. The man-made concrete pathway, seen as a line, is perhaps an analogy for curriculum. We might rebel against the designated pathway and create our own lines of flight like the non-human creatures that fly, crawl, wriggle, and burrow under and over the "infrastructure" of the park (Ingold, 2016, p. 106).

What begins as undifferentiated space becomes place as we get to know it better and endow it with values... the ideas "space" and "place" require each other for definition... if we think of space as that which allows movement, then place is pause; each pause in movement makes it possible for location to be transformed into place (Tuan, 1977, p. 6).

Seeing the paths as lines, I began to understand that this town is created by visitors in transit. The visitors are going from this place to the next, but they pause here. The thing that connects these places, where they came from, where they are now, and where they are going to, is not so different from the pathway in the photograph.

Participant Reluctance

The trainees' initial visits to the garden were met with trepidation. In varying degrees, they saw their visits to the community garden as having a negative impact on study and teaching time, essay writing time, and portfolio filling time. They were concerned with meeting the requirements of the course and perhaps overly concerned with box-ticking. The pressures of time and deadlines can be all-encompassing for students, but my intention was to disrupt those pressures. The trainee teachers resisted. They had been conditioned to expect educational experiences that supported concepts such as banking knowledge and evidencing their practice. The tension my garden project created, although surprising at first, was understandable upon reflection. I was asking them to deviate from the linear path that they believed would enable them to achieve the qualifications they sought.

The students worried that any pause in academic time would be more detrimental to them than any perceived benefits from outdoor, environmental education, or slow pedagogy. The impact of modern academia's obsession with auditing, measuring value, and impact on a linear scale can be seen in the trainee's resistance. Melucci (1996) refers to this kind of perceived time importance as *time dissonance*. Does time dissonance mean that the natural order of things has been lost? Does it mean that the natural capacity and desire to pause has been forgotten?

Personal Vignette

I was disheartened and frustrated that some trainees didn't see the project's value and were reluctant to get involved. I questioned my intentions, realising I had my own agenda, to connect with the space. Related to the stresses and pressures of academia, this was an opportunity for me to escape. I longed for a pause from the curriculum. I desired to experiment and be creative in a space on the edge of my experiences. The project therefore was entangled with my own agency and agenda.

When I chose the medium of ekphrastic poetry for trainees to share skills in an activity with the volunteers, I did not disclose its connection with PhEmaterialist and posthuman views which shaped the project. In hindsight, this was an error on my part. I did not sufficiently respect the agency of the trainee teachers as co-producers of our shared knowledge, nor did I respect our mutual entanglement.

In contrast to Barad, Augé (1995) suggests that places are created by their narratives and the connections that bind stories from person to place and back again. My own story is bound to this place, as are all the entanglements that I bring with it. In a Baradian sense, this place, my stories, the bodies, the plants, flowers, blades of grass, these words, and the ones that come next are all agential. Both Augé and Barad, therefore, diffract through this paper, my writing, and the place.

As a teacher educator at the university for the last five years, my ties to this academic space and to this geographical place were coming to an end. My path was changing. I was moving on to a new role, in a prison, outside of academia yet somehow still inside it too. For sure, I would be away from this natural space and freedom to be in nature. However, my

aspirations for a different curriculum made me feel a sense of unfinished business and somehow kept me inside the academic world. I felt an urgency to connect these people before my departure. And yet, my presence in this place was partial, one foot in and one out – transitory. I wondered, if “the traveller’s space may thus be the archetype of non-place” (Augé, 1995, p. 86).

Discomfort

Unwanted interruptions both on the part of the trainees and the garden volunteers led to discomfort for all involved. During the ekphrastic poetry session, this was demonstrated in the body language. It was compounded by prior negative experiences with the educational system that some of the elderly community garden volunteers had. One said this:

I never went to university, or college. For girls, it depended on if you were the teacher’s favourite, if you weren’t then, well, you amounted to nothing. (Volunteer B)

I had not foreseen that such forces would be in play when I conceived of the project. I did not anticipate the discomfort I would create.

Personal Vignette

What I expected and wanted to be a co-productive and rhizomatic project ended up being, in Deleuzian terms, arborescent and hierarchical. In diffracting the outcomes of the project with posthuman and other theories, I came to realize my failings. I see now that the use of posthumanism in this way was forced. It left little room for the process of becoming in the trainees and the volunteers, which like any wildflower needs time to grow in its own time with its own rhythm. To force posthumanist perspectives on these groups without giving them the time, the context, the space to breathe it in and understand the ontology, is like growing flowers, cutting them down, and sticking them in a vase. While we might delight in their beauty, that beauty is not sustainable.

However, according to hooks (1994), discomfort is key to social change. I realized that I was encouraging the trainee teachers and garden volunteers to encounter something out of their comfort-zone, but perhaps it also led to discomfort as a positive force, as hooks meant it to be. Perhaps, as Mannay (2016) suggests, to “resist the familiar” creates opportunity for new knowledge, beyond the taken-for-granted (in Kara, 2020 p. 16). Working through my personal discomfort, my disappointment about the lack of enthusiasm, and the awkwardness of the situation was key in maintaining hope for curriculum social change.

Despite the discomfort, I think the project did bring the temporal spaces together in some form of transformation. Perhaps not transformative in making meaningful relations with others, but there are now connections between the garden volunteers, the trainees, me, the space, the non-human entities (Todd, 2003). It did, I believe, create hope in our collective ability to produce something new (Wilson, 2020). The trainee teachers felt a sense of accomplishment in engaging with the community group, growing produce together. The community group felt their accomplishments in the creation of the poetry. These small moments of pause were where the moments of hope actualized (Cohen & Dalke, 2019).



Figure 4

*“I’m gonna (sic) make a cheesecake, you’ve never tasted a cheesecake until you have the tartness of fresh raspberries from the allotment to cut through it” (Volunteer A).
(Credit: G. Trafford, 2021)*

The following is the final ekphrastic poem co-created by the trainee teachers and the community garden volunteers.

*Friends of South Park
Vibrant and distinct
Lightening up the greenery
With your multi-faceted centre
Community gathering for the greater good
Bees and insects exploring
Volunteers greeting the sun
An oasis in the urban environment.*

The captured photographs and final poem are the material mementos of the connection between the two places. At least in these material ways, our non-linear entanglement in both spaces remains, whether we consciously acknowledge that or not.

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